**Joseph G. McCoy, Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest (1874)**

*In 1867, Joseph G. McCoy established stockyards and a cattle market in Abilene, Texas. This was the same year that the Kansas-Pacific Railroad reached Abilene. Taking advantage of, and expanding, the Chisholm Trail, McCoy successfully marketed his new venture and for about five years was incredibly successful. As the railroad expanded and new settlers pushed the boundaries of settlement westward, the cattle industry moved westward as well. In addition, as the railroads became more efficient, cattle driving declined. The selection below, from McCoy's 1874 account, is considered a classic source for understanding the expansion of the nation's western frontier.*

We left the herd fairly started upon the trail for the northern market. Of these trails there are several: one leading to Baxter Springs and Chetopa; another called the "Old Shawnee trail," leaving Red river and running eastward, crossing the Arkansas not far above Fort Gibson, thence bending westward up the Arkansas river. But the principal trail now traveled is more direct and is known as "Chisholm trail," so named from a semicivilized Indian who is said to have traveled it first. It is more direct, has more prairie, less timber, more small streams and less large ones, and altogether better grass and fewer flies (no civilized Indian tax or wild Indian disturbances) than any other route yet driven over, and is also much shorter in distance because direct from Red river to Kansas. Twenty-five to thirty-five days is the usual time required to bring a drove from Red river to the southern line of Kansas, a distance of between two hundred and fifty and three hundred miles, and an excellent country to drive over. So many cattle have been driven over the trail in the last few years that a broad highway is tread out, looking much like a national highway; so plain, a fool could not fail to keep in it. . . .

Few occupations are more cheerful, lively, and pleasant than that of the cowboy on a fine day or night; but when the storm comes, then is his manhood and often his skill and bravery put to test. When the night is inky dark and the lurid lightning flashes its zigzag course athwart the heavens, and the coarse thunder jars the earth, the winds moan fresh and lively over the prairie, the electric balls dance from tip to tip of the cattle's horns-then the position of the cowboy on duty is trying, far more than romantic. When the storm breaks over his head, the least occurrence unusual, such as the breaking of a dry weed or stick, or a sudden and near flash of lightning, will start the herd as if by magic, all at an instant, upon a wild rush, and woe to the horse or man or camp that may be in their path. The only possible show for safety is to mount and ride with them until you can get outside the stampeding column. It is customary to train cattle to listen to the noise of the herder, who sings in a voice more sonorous than musical a lullaby consisting of a few short monosyllables. A stranger to the business of stock driving will scarce credit the statement that the wildest herd will not run, so long as they can hear distinctly the voice of the herder above the din of the storm.

But if by any mishap the herd gets off on a real stampede, it is by bold, dashing, reckless riding in the darkest of nights, and by adroit, skillful management that it is checked and brought under control. The moment the herd is off, the cowboy turns his horse at full speed down the retreating column and seeks to get up beside the leaders, which he does not attempt to stop suddenly, for such an effort would be futile, but turns them to the left or right hand and gradually curves them into a circle, the circumference of which is narrowed down as fast as possible until the whole herd is rushing wildly round and round on as small a piece of ground as possible for them to occupy.

Then the cowboy begins his lullaby note in a loud voice, which has a great effect in quieting the herd. When all is still and the herd well over its scare, they are returned to their bed ground, or held where stopped until daylight. . . .

After a drive of twenty-five to one hundred days the herd arrives in western Kansas, whither, in advance, its owner has come, and decided what point at which he will make his headquarters. Straightway a good herding place is sought out, and the herd, upon its arrival, placed thereon, to remain until a buyer is found, who is diligently sought after; but if not found as soon as the cattle are fat, they are shipped to market. But the drover has a decided preference for selling on the prairie, for there he feels at home and self-possessed; but when he goes on the cars he is out of his element and doing something he doesn't understand much about and doesn't wish to learn, especially at the price it has cost many cattle shippers. . . .

We have in a former paper said that Texan drovers, as a class, were clannish, and easily gulled by promises of high prices for their stock. As an illustration of these statements we cite a certain secret meeting of the drovers held at one of the camps in 1867, whereat they all, after talking the matter over, pledged themselves to hold their cattle for 3 cents per pound gross and to sell none for less. One of the principal arguments used was that their cattle must be worth that price or those Illinoisans would not be expending so much money and labor in preparing facilities for shipping them.

To this resolution they adhered persistently, refusing $2.75 per 100 pounds for fully 10,000 head; and afterwards, failing to get their 3 cents on the prairie for their cattle, shipped them to Chicago on their own account and sold them there at $2.25 to $2.50 per 100 pounds; and out of that paid a freight of $150 per car, realizing from $10 to $15 per head less than they had haughtily refused upon the prairie. Some of them refused to accept these prices and packed their cattle upon their own account. Their disappointment and chagrin at their failure to force a buyer to pay 3 cents per pound for their cattle was great and bitter, but their refusal to accept the offer of 2 3/4 cents per pound was great good fortune to the would-be buyers, for at that price $100,000 would have been lost on 10,000 head of cattle. An attempt was made the following year to form a combination to put up prices; but a burnt child dreads the fire, and the attempted combination failed, and every drover looked out sharply for himself.

Now one instance touching their susceptibility to being gulled by fine promises. In the fall of 1867, when Texan cattle were selling at from $24 to $28 per head in Chicago, a well-dressed, smooth-tongued individual put in an appearance at Abilene and claimed to be the representative of a certain (bogus) packing company of Chicago, and was desirous of purchasing several thousand head of cattle. He would pay Chicago prices at Abilene or, rather than be particular, $5 or $10 per head more than the same cattle would sell for in Chicago. It was astonishing to see how eagerly certain drovers fell into his trap and bargained their cattle off to him at $35 per head at Abilene, fully $15 more than they would pay out. But, mark you, the buyer, so "childlike and bland," could only pay the little sum of $25 down on 400 to 800 head, but would pay the balance when he got to Leavenworth with the cattle, he being afraid to bring his wealth up in that wild country. In the meantime they would load the cattle on the cars, bill them in the name of the buyer, and of course everything would be all right. Strange as it may appear, several of the hitherto most suspicious drovers of 1867 fell in with this swindler's scheme; and were actually about to let him ship their herds off on a mere verbal promise, when the parties in charge of the yards, seeing that the drovers were about to be defrauded out of their stock, posted them to have the cattle billed in their own name, and then, if the pay was not forthcoming, they would have possession of their own stock without troublesome litigation, as every man of sense anticipated they would have. When the swindler, after various excuses for his failures to pay at Leavenworth, Quincy, and Chicago (all the while trying to get the cattle into his own hands) found that he must come down with the cash, he very plainly told the Texan to go to Hades with his cattle. Instead of obeying this warm parting injunction of his newfound, high-priced buyer, he turned his cattle over to a regular commission man and received about $26 per head at Chicago less freight charges, or almost $18 per head at Abilene instead of $35 per head.

**Document Analysis**

1. How did accounts like this one contribute to popular mythology about the “Old West”?
2. How did the system of selling cattle work?
3. What was the Chisholm Trail? What was its role in the development of the West?